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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000204

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/19/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [FJ](#)  
SUBJECT: FIJI: BAINIMARAMA, QARASE MEET; PR EFFORT IN  
WORKS?; SOME OTHER NEWS DOWNBEAT

REF: A. SUVA 155

[1](#)B. SUVA 185

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

#### Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) Fiji interim Prime Minister Bainimarama met with deposed PM Qarase on May 19, a first since the December 2006 coup. Little of substance was reportedly discussed, but they agreed to meet again. Interim Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum announced that the interim government (IG) is now willing for outside parties to observe Fiji's judiciary. The moves may indicate a new IG effort to burnish its public image, more than any real change of course. Qarase and other leading non-IG politicians met recently to discuss strategies, including how to respond to the IG's recent invitation for the UN and Commonwealth to sponsor a forum on electoral reform. IG election preparations remain sluggish. The Chair of the International Monitoring Group for the People's Charter process resigned, reportedly because, on close observation, he was not impressed. Most Fijian provincial councils are rejecting IG reforms for the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). Anniversaries in May of Fiji coups in 1987 and 2000 have prompted discussion of the "coup culture." It appears Bainimarama has won another internal military power play. The IG is replacing three members of Air Pacific's board, reportedly as retribution for the airline's refusal to ignore a court order and assist with the deportation of the Fiji Times publisher a few weeks ago. End summary.

Bainimarama-Qarase meeting; PR effort?

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[1](#)2. (C) Interim PM Bainimarama and deposed PM Qarase met for 45 minutes the afternoon of May 19, accompanied by Catholic Archbishop Mataka and Methodist Church President Ratabacaca. Per Ref A, the two church leaders have been working for such a meeting for at least the last month. Afterward, Bainimarama told the media that dialogue is essential to find solutions to Fiji's problems. Qarase welcomed the meeting, said the mood was cordial, but indicated there was little substance so far, more a talk about talks, with agreement to meet again in coming weeks. In another interesting development, interim Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum told the media May 19 that the IG is now ready to welcome visits from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Judiciary and the International Bar Association. Earlier this year, the IG rejected requests from both to visit Fiji. We hear that the IG Solicitor General, New Zealand citizen Christopher Pryde, has gained Bainimarama's ear and has been urging the IG to appear more reasonable publicly, even if hard-line policy judgments remain unchanged. A source near Bainimarama reinforces a wide-spread rumor: the IG has no intention to

actually hold elections in 2009.

Other discussions...

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13. (SBU) Qarase, deposed Opposition Leader Beddoes, and FNP Party leader Singh revealed May 19 that they have held discussions recently about how best to move forward. Reportedly the three are skeptical about the recent IG proposal (Ref B) for the UN SYG and Commonwealth SG to oversee and fund a political forum to consider electoral reforms. The politicians do not reject the thought, but they want to see far more detail about what would be the agenda and how independent any such forum would be from IG control, including the degree of separation from the National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF, People's Charter) process.

Election preparations -- still slow

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14. (U) The IG's endless effort to name a Supervisor of Elections has hit yet another snag. After the first choice turned out to have fatal flaws, including disbarment in New Zealand, the second choice has as yet unspecified problems in the eyes of interim Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum. Discussions between the Constitutional Offices Commission and Sayed-Khaiyum continue. At meetings of the Joint Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)-Fiji Working Group in recent weeks, PIF members have complained loudly about the numerous delays and have pushed, without success, for the IG to lay out its detailed road map to elections.

Overseer for People's Charter resigns

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15. (C) The chair of the International Monitoring Group (IMG), a three-person body to provide supposedly neutral oversight of the NCBBF process, has resigned. Gert Van der Linden, a former ADB Vice President, jumped ship. The official story is that he has too many other projects in play. We are told by reputable sources that the real story is that, after he visited Fiji early this month, he realized the NCBBF has major flaws and he did not want to tarnish his own reputation by staying involved with it. Van der Linden initially signed on as a favor to his old colleague from the ADB John Samy, the creative force behind the NCBBF. We hear the other two "independent" members of the IMG pressed Van der Linden not to include his actual motivation in the resignation letter. That appears to confirm, if there was doubt, that the remaining two are not neutral overseers but are intent to protect the NCBBF process from public criticism.

IG reform plans for GCC hit obstacles

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16. (C) The interim government (IG) effort to establish a reformed and more malleable Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) is in trouble. The chiefly forces who in April 2007 orchestrated the old GCC's refusal to bless Bainimarama's nomination of interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau to be Vice President, and thus triggered the IG to scrap the old institution, appear to have convinced the traditional chiefly system not to accept the new system, headed by Bainimarama as Minister for Fijian Affairs. At least nine of fourteen provinces have refused to tab new nominees to the revised GCC and have also rejected participation in the NCBBF. Given the IG's propensity to bulldoze opposition by issuing new presidential decrees, the selection rules for the new GCC may change again soon. In the meantime, the vice-presidential position remains vacant, with President Iloilo's health very much in doubt.

Thinking about the coup culture

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17. (C) Fiji's first coup by Sitiveni Rabuka took place May 14, 1987. The 2000 Speight coup was on May 19, 2000. In that context, a number of people including Rabuka have spoken out publicly in recent days about the perils of the coup

culture. Rabuka has publicly admitted that his 1987 coups, which he has hinted were encouraged behind the scenes by prominent people (read Ratu Mara), were mistakes that set Fiji back severely. On May 19, Fiji TV cheekily drew tape from its archives of interviews a few years ago in which now-interim Finance Minister Chaudhry, RFMF spokesman Major Leweni, and others decried coups and the coup culture. Bainimarama announced to the media last week that Leweni is returning to Suva from an assignment in Fiji's Beijing embassy to become head of the IG's information office. In the months after the December 2006 coup, Leweni, as military spokesman, dissembled endlessly on Bainimarama's behalf.

¶18. (C) The NCBBF has as part of its mandate to consider how to eliminate Fiji's "coup culture." We have seen draft NCBBF papers on the military's future roles, which, in part, propose to cure the problem by expanding the military's influence in all sorts of new directions, presumably in the belief that keeping soldiers really busy with civic endeavors will leave them no time to plot. Some influential Fijians, including deposed VP Madraiwiwi, have raised the "immunity" issue in recent days, arguing that is the only way to convince Bainimarama and his crowd to step down. Others suggest Bainimarama has given no indication that "immunity" currently plays in his calculations at all. He seems intent on dramatically transforming Fiji into a near-perfect place before permitting a return to democracy.

Senior military officers shunted aside

¶19. (C) Three military Colonels have gone on extended leave. They are Col. Samuela Saumatua (RFMF Chief of Staff), Col. Netani Rika (Director of RFMF Human Resources), and Col. Samuela Raduva (head of the RFMF credit union). A military spokesman said there is "nothing sinister," just that all are nearing retirement and have leave days to use. Others suggest that Saumatua, in particular, is being removed for having reportedly challenged Commodore Bainimarama's leadership in recent months. If so, Bainimarama is demonstrating yet again his ability to keep the military in his pocket, despite rumors of discontent.

Punishing Air Pacific for following rule of law

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¶10. (C) The RFMF is buffeting Fiji's national airline, Air Pacific, in the aftermath of Air Pacific's refusal in early May to ignore a court order intended to bar deportation of Fiji Times publisher Evan Hannah. A reliable source tells us that, at the time, LtCol. Tevita Mara phoned senior Air Pacific officials in an attempt to force the deportation, despite the acknowledged court order. Last week, Air Pacific announced a major reshuffle of its Board, which has five Fiji Government-nominated members and four Qantas Airlines-nominated members (with Qantas having a veto power over selection of the Fiji-nominated chairman). Three of the five Fiji members are being replaced immediately at IG instigation. The move replaces people appointed nearly two years ago by deposed PM Qarase, and we are told the motive is clearly retribution for the stubbornness regarding Hannah. Reportedly, one of the new appointees is to be Bernadette Rounds-Ganilau, the IG's first Tourism Minister who lost out in January's cabinet changes.

Comment

¶11. (C) The Bainimarama-Qarase meeting is potentially positive, though the most likely explanation for Bainimarama's sudden about face is an attempt to give the appearance of reasonableness rather than an actual interest in finding common ground. It may be the meeting was intended to influence the UN SYG and Commonwealth SG to buy into the IG's proposed forum for electoral reform, a mechanism that would surely delay actual election preparations for many months. Another possible explanation for the meeting is that

Bainimarama owes a huge debt to Archbishop Mataca, who in accepting a co-chair role in the NCBBF alienated a significant portion of his Catholic flock. Mataca wants dialogue. Still, Bainimarama has repeatedly made very clear behind the scenes that he sees Qarase as history, not a contributor to Fiji's future.

¶12. (C) All in all, the mood for many in Fiji is downcast. They realize that the IG's current hypocritical governance -- publicly advocating rule of law while privately ignoring it; publicly talking of a coup-free, democratic future while privately subverting any rapid return; talking "clean up" while privately cashing in -- all that needs to end. Fiji's economy remains depressed. Yet a solution for Fiji's problems is elusive, unless Bainimarama's meeting with Qarase turns out to be a real signal that the IG is coming to realize it is not winning hearts and minds and, thus, it needs to find a way out. International jawboning and sanctions, including by the U.S., remain important. They encourage good-governance advocates within Fiji, and they put a degree of pressure on the IG.

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